

DoD News Briefing with Col. Tom James, commander, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division, and ePRT Spokesman, Mr. Howard Van Vranken, from Iraq, Dec. 01, 2008.

(Note: Colonel James and Mr. Van Vranken appear via teleconference.)

COL. GARY KECK (director, Department of Defense Press Office): Well, good morning, everyone. It's 10:00 by our clock here in the briefing room. And it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

I'm Colonel Gary Keck, the director of the Press Office. And I've been asked to moderate this press conference. And let me just do a sound check and make sure Colonel James and Mr. Van Vranken can hear me.

Gentlemen, can you hear me okay?

COL. JAMES: Gary, I can hear you fine, thanks.

MR. VAN VRANKEN: Loud and clear, Gary.

COL. KECK: Super.

We're privileged to have with us today Colonel Tom James, who's the commander of 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division and Mr. Howard Van Vranken, who's the Embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader with the brigade. This is Colonel James' third time with us. He's getting to be a pretty familiar face. And he and Mr. Van Vranken are coming to us from Camp Victory in Iraq.

They both have opening statements. So with that, I'm just going to turn it over to Colonel James. Go ahead.

COL. JAMES: Well, thanks, Gary. I want to make a short statement, then hand it over to Howard, and then we'll answer questions.

Good morning. As stated earlier, I'm Colonel Tom James. I'm the commander of Task Force Vanguard, the 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. We're attached to Task Force Mountain in central Iraq.

Our brigade is arrayed across the Babil and Karbala provinces approximately 100 kilometers south of Baghdad along the southern avenues of approach into the capital city. Both of these provinces are under provincial Iraqi control.

We provide tactical overwatch in Babil province, partnered with the 31st Iraqi Army Brigade and the Babil police force. We stand in operational overwatch of the Karbala province with a military transition team, partnered with the 33rd Iraqi Army Brigade and a security element to escort the Provincial Reconstruction Team in Karbala.

There are five key points I'd like to make about the current situation in our area of responsibility.

First, the population feels secure, and the quality of life is improving.

Attacks are down from eight a day last year to less than two per week. When we arrived, the population could not move in 30 percent of our area of responsibility. They now enjoy freedom of movement throughout both provinces. The population believes in the Iraqi army and police, and no longer allows sanctuary to extremists.

The capabilities of the Iraqi security forces have improved dramatically over the last year, enhancing security and enabling positive and real growth in local economies and governments.

The second point: The Iraqi security forces are capable and competent. The Iraqi army and police have made great strides in terms of manning, equipping, basing and training. The Iraqi army is capable of conducting precise offensive operations, based on intelligence that they have personally generated. The army and the police work extremely well together, and the population believes in both organizations.

We continue to assist with training and provide reconnaissance and -- correction -
- aviation assets as required.

The third point: Governance and economics continue to flourish in both provinces. The security situation allows the governors, provincial council leaders and directors general to routinely travel to north Babil and throughout Karbala, feats that were inconceivable only a year ago.

This -- (audio break) -- provincial leadership resulted in initiation of more than 100 government-sponsored projects in north Babil alone. Another 50 projects were facilitated by coalition forces but funded by ICERP, Iraqi money, applied at the local level.

The Provincial Reconstruction Teams mentor the provincial leadership, encouraging development and investment in areas outside the provincial seats of government. We continue to enable reconstruction team operations in both provinces.

The fourth point: We're focused on several key tasks for the future.

Number one, the successful execution of free and fair elections in January.

Number two, the transfer of the Sons of Iraq program to the Iraqi army and government Iraq for management, payment and eventual transition to other forms of productive employment.

Number three, continue to work professionalization of the Iraqi security forces.

And number four, further basing adjustments -- (audio break) -- forces in accordance with the pending SOFA agreement.

Finally, our soldiers and families are the greatest in the world. None of these -- correction -- none of these successes would be possible without the dedication and sacrifice of our soldiers and their wonderful families.

Their ability to rapidly adapt to the complex and dangerous situations never ceases to amaze me. I am honored to command such a dedicated group of warriors.

With that, I'd like to hand it over to Mr. Howard Van Vranken, who, as stated earlier, is our embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team leader. And his team have been an enormous asset to us, that have been embedded with us for the past year. They've been an invaluable asset. They've been tied to us with all planning and execution and preparation of all operations.

Mr. Van Vranken? Howard?

MR. VAN VRANKEN: Thanks, Tom.

Good morning. I'm Howard Van Vranken. For the last 11 months I've been the team leader of the embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team attached to Colonel James' 4th Brigade Combat Team, 3rd ID, working in -- primarily in north Babil.

I want to echo what Colonel James mentioned about the changes and the improvements that we've seen in 2008, particularly in the provincial and national governments' engagements in north Babil. Frankly, the improvements that we've witnessed, to use Colonel James's word, would have been inconceivable a year ago.

The governor and the provincial council chairman have both made a significant effort to engage in the north. The ISF, both the Iraqi army, the Iraqi police, have improved dramatically, both in terms of their capabilities but also in terms of their engagement and the credibility they've got with the local populations.

Economically, we continue to see improvements, and those are largely made possible by the improved security situation that the ISF, along with Colonel James's brigade, have helped to secure.

In Babil province, there's a great deal of anticipation these days for the provincial election in January. We're confident in the ability of the Iraqis to secure the elections, and we expect that they'll be conducted in a way that's perceived to be free and fair and transparent to the population. Our contacts locally tell us that the perception of fairness is almost as important as the outcome and the results of the elections.

The population's looking forward to the Iraqi High Electoral Commission's education campaign. That's going to kick off later this month, with the support of the EPRT and the PRT. In general, we're beginning to see vigorous campaigns by candidates. It's -- a significant importance in this election is the full participation of the Sunni population, who boycotted, in large part, the 2005 provincial elections. They recognize that the boycott was a mistake, a serious blunder on their part, and they're committed to maximizing their participation in -- (audio break). That's a big change and a big improvement, quite frankly.

There's still a lot of work to do. The progress that we've seen is not irreversible. But budget execution, the provision of essential services and improving the rule of law stand out as areas that still need to be improved.

The economy doesn't generate nearly enough jobs for everyone who wants one. Nonetheless, there has been progress, and we see momentum moving into 2009. And Iraqis are generally optimistic about their future.

And with that, I think we're going to open it up to questions, Tom?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. We're ready for your questions.

COL. KECK: Okay, gentlemen. Thank you very much for the overview. So let's go ahead and begin.

Courtney?

MS. KUBE: Hi. This is Courtney Kube from NBC News. If I could ask both you, Colonel James, and Mr. Van Vranken, what has been the reaction with the local Iraqi officials that you've been working with, interacting with over the past few months, to the recent status of forces agreement? Are they optimistic? Are there any parts they specifically found difficult to swallow?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. They're generally optimistic. You know, it's a big deal, a historical event. As you well know, as they voted, the council representatives voted for it on national television. So it was televised -- no hidden ballots, et cetera. So they were out front about it.

We're real excited about it, and we're excited about looking forward to the implementation of that. You know, we've been anticipating it for a while. We've known for the past seven months, working with Task Force Mountain, that this would eventually occur, and so we've been adjusting our footprint and our operations to be prepared for the SOFA agreement to be passed.

Specifically, what we've done is we've reduced our footprint from 14 locations down to four. The Iraqi security forces are in the lead and we're in support of them. And we have been for most of the time we've been here, but especially the last seven months.

So they're taking off with that. And so that's been critical. Handling detainees are now done by the Iraqi police, and that's -- we're no longer in the detainee business. So those are things that we've been working at towards the SOFA agreement, and we're seeing that as a very positive trend. And it's been well received from the population, as well.

Howard, do you have anything to add about the SOFA?

MR. VAN VRANKEN: Well, I would just highlight what you'd already said, Tom. Generally speaking, the contacts that we have in Babil province are welcoming of the SOFA agreement. They recognize the important role and the partnership that the United States plays in Iraq, both in terms of security but also helping with economic development and rule of law, development of effective governance, and some of the other areas that we're emphasizing. And they welcome our presence.

Generally speaking, they respect the ability of the Iraqi security forces to secure the population; but nonetheless, I think that they understand that there is a role for the United States to play over the next three years, and perhaps beyond.

Q Hi. This is Jeff Schogol with Stars and Stripes. A question for both of you. As we approach the elections in January, are you seeing any tensions between Sadrists and other Shi'ite political groups?

COL. JAMES: You know, for the most part, with elections coming on, we're not seeing any tensions. What I'm seeing right now is a very positive situation in both provinces, and anticipation of those elections.

You know, the Iraqi security forces established a great plan in securing the registration sites in preparation for the voting and in the elections that were upcoming. And that was an extremely successful security mission for them. So we're seeing that as working, and a very positive thing.

And so we see that -- and the local population wants to be recognized. The Sunnis, as Howard had mentioned, in the north, really want to participate in these elections, and we see that the polling sites and the registration sites have allowed that to happen.

So a very positive situation, received by the population. I have not seen any clear Sadrist activity or any jockeying in some form of extremist-type activity related to the elections at this point.

Howard, do you have anything to add about elections?

MR. VAN VRANKEN: Yeah, specifically about the Sadrists and friction with other Shi'a groups. We're not seeing things specific in our area. We're hearing the same sort of national issues in Iraq as everyone else is, but there hasn't been any sort of specific, you know, campaign of intimidation or threats in our area.

I think it's going to be what I would call a vigorous campaign. I mean, Iraqis are engaged in the political process, which to me is an extremely encouraging sign that they recognize the credibility of the elections and they understand the importance of engaging in it. And I think to the extent that they have a vigorous campaign that's hard but fairly fought, I think is a very good thing.

Q This is David Morgan from Reuters. Colonel James, given the improvements that have taken place, as you say, and the optimism about the SOFA, the lack of tension over the approaching elections, how do you see the role of the U.S. military changing over the next several months? And from a practical point of view, really, how much longer would it be necessary to have a U.S. military presence in your area?

COL. JAMES: Yeah, absolutely. The progress has been enormous over the past year. The successes we have had in reducing the attacks, as I mentioned in my statement, it's -- the Iraqi security forces have improved to a point now where they can handle the security situation with minimal support from coalition forces.

We envision -- and Babil Province alone, I'll take that as an example -- that we can reduce our footprint from a brigade combat team of roughly 3,800 soldiers down to about a battalion's worth of about 1,000 soldiers to be able to handle the security situation, and that is changing because on 22 November -- correction, October -- when we did a provincial Iraqi control of the province, they took the lead. And so now we're in a support role as opposed to leading the security fight.

So we're now much less of a footprint providing resources as required and training as required, but the Iraqi security forces have been in the lead for the majority of the time we've been here and will continue in the future.

So I see us being able to reduce our footprint in Babil Province while the Iraqi security forces take this over. And we're seeing that now and we're prepared to do so.

Now, we're going to rip out -- we're going to transition with another brigade that's coming here over the next month, and when they take over, they will fall in on us about with a like-size organization, but that's just to draw equipment and pieces -- to set them up for success to be redistributed in other places with a multinational division center -- expanding as it covers more provinces. But for the most part, we can reduce almost two-thirds as far as the coalition footprint goes, but still providing the support to the Iraqi security forces, really continuing to build up their confidence that they continue to build on daily.

Q Hey, this is Courtney from NBC again. What's the timeline that you expect you can reduce from a brigade down to a battalion? What's the estimated date you think you might be able to be down to a battalion in Babil?

COL. JAMES: You know, I don't have specific timelines. I could just tell you that the conditions exist on the ground right now operationally with the Iraqi security force capability and the government's ability to control those security forces in Babil Province, that we could reduce down to about a battalion's worth now, I mean, the operational set is available now to do that. And we will see that eventually happen, but it will be in the near-term; I don't have specific timelines associated with that because it has to do with some repositioning of forces throughout the theater.

Q Can I also ask about the Sons of Iraq program in your area? Can you give us sort of an update on that, how many you have, if any have been transferred over to Iraqi security forces?

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. The Sons of Iraq program has been a great program for securing the population and thickening the security lines where we don't have Iraqi army and Iraqi police. Right now, we have 5,115 Sons of Iraq in Babil Province and that's what we manage as a brigade combat team. I am optimistic about this program in the future. It's going to really require the government of Iraq and the Iraqi security forces to take it over from us and be able to transition it.

You know, I look at it in two ways, transition -- correction, transfer -- which is transferring the Sons of Iraq program over to the Iraqi army and the government of Iraq managed by the Iraqi army and that is going really well. We started that months ago. The Iraqi army is paying our Sons of Iraq forces -- (audio break) -- and they've been doing that for a period of time now. So that system is in place, but we're still paying them with coalition money. Around the turn of the year, January, February time frame, the GOI is going to take over that payment and the system will already be in place and plugged in and be able to work the transfer. So I'm very positive about the transfer of Sons of Iraq to Iraqi army control and the GOI.

Then the next step is transition to other forms of employment, be it the Iraqi security forces or any other employment like farming or industrial-type jobs, those kinds of things. Right now, we're looking at 20 (percent) to 30 percent transitioning of the Iraqi army and police and then further transitioning to other jobs potentially related to security -- FPS or facility protection services, those kinds of things. But it's going to really require the government of Iraq to get involved, working through the reconciliation cell and processing the Sons of Iraq into these other forms of employment, productive off-ramps.

At this point in time, it's been slow-go with us trying to get Sons of Iraq into the Iraqi forces. We've prepped all of the packets and we've handed them over to the reconciliation cell and that's working right now, it's just -- it's slow, but I believe when the GOI takes this over, it will gain momentum.

MR. VAN VRANKEN: I'll just highlight. I think it's been an essential program over the course of the past year and I've got full faith that the Iraqi government is going to do as they've pledged to do and that is to maintain it and to work to find suitable

employment for those current Sons of Iraq. So I think it was a good program and it's headed in the right direction the way it is now.

Q This is Jeff with Stars and Stripes again for Colonel James. Have you issued any kind of internal memo or done anything to explain to your troops what exactly the SOFA means in terms of the U.S. presence in Iraq?

COL. JAMES: At this point, I have not issued any implementation memo. We have discussed with our soldiers generally what it means, and at this point in time related to SOFA, the best thing we could do is just go by the rules and regulations and adjustments we have made when we transition the province to Iraqi control. And that's what we have done, Iraqi security forces in the lead, coalition in support. They lead operations, they work detainee operations and our footprint is reduced as we've handed over.

One thing I would like to add to as I mentioned earlier, we've transitioned from 14 distributed locations down to four now and we're working a couple of additional patrol bases, but they're on the Iraqi battalion FOBs to facilitate partnerships. So that's kind of what we've -- and FOB being a forward operating base where these Iraqi battalions are.

Q What types of questions are you dealing with from your troops about what the SOFA means?

COL. JAMES: You know, they understand what that means is the government of Iraq has established the conditions to allow us to stay on for a period of time and in addition to that where we know -- we're really confident when we walk the streets of Musaib and Iskandariya with our Iraqi partners, that the Iraqi government is moving towards with our government the conditions that exist that would allow us to continue to operate, so we're very positive about that and continue the mission unencumbered.

Q Has anyone asked does this mean the war is over as of the end of December 2011?

COL. JAMES: No one has asked that. We know that we're still focused on our mission and the mission is not yet complete and we know that we're still in a very dangerous environment. Although the enemy situation has greatly decreased, we still have to make sure that we take this to conclusion with our Iraqi partners and we continue to focus on the mission and protecting our soldiers.

COL. KECK: Okay, gentlemen, it looks like we've exhausted all of the questions for today's press conference and we appreciate you being with us. As is our tradition, we'd like to turn it back over to you for any closing comments or remarks or anything that you've thought of that might be of interest to us that you didn't give us earlier.

So back over to you guys.

COL. JAMES: Absolutely. Howard, would you like to --

MR. VAN KRANKEN: Yeah, I would, actually. I just want to highlight the partnership that we've built with the Iraqis. What we found is that Iraqis are pretty much like most Americans and that they value justice and freedom. They want to live in safety, free of terror and they want their children to have a better world. They want to prosper and they want to be able to worship freely.

We've helped to support the development in our part of Iraq during the past year and we're proud of Iraq's accomplishments. I also want to highlight the outstanding work that the Vanguard Brigade has done, the soldiers there are really the best diplomats on the ground in our area of Iraq and it's a pleasure to serve with them. Colonel?

COL. JAMES: Thanks, Howard and I appreciate those kind words. Just a couple of things in closing. You know, we just recently -- today, matter of fact is our one year from the transfer of authority when we took over our area of operation, 1 December of last year. So we've been operating in the zone responsible for the respective area with our Iraqi security force counterparts for exactly one year and there's been an enormous amount of progress that has occurred and we defined the decisive point in our area of operation as reducing the threat to a level while simultaneously building up the Iraqi security forces to a level that they could handle that threat with minimal support from coalition forces and then allow the government to be able to get to the people the resources and essential services that they so deserve. And we feel like we'll reach that decisive point and now we just got to continue to sustain it and I believe that the Iraqi security forces are capable. They're out there executing. They believe in their country. They're patriotic, and I believe that they will be -- (audio break).

I want to thank Howard for joining me today. The embedded provincial reconstruction team is key and essential for brigade combat teams in the counterinsurgency environment to be able to continue to work the lines of effort related to governance and economics while simultaneously working security. And our ability to do that has been decisive in a lot of ways in allowing us to reach that decisive point.

I would also like to thank our Iraqi security force counterparts because they're out there and they're risking their lives every day for their country and have done an enormous job. They were able to build themselves up while in contact with an insurgency and now as the situation and the enemy situation is decreasing, you're seeing them get to build stronger and stronger and for each day they get better and better and I see that very positive for the future.

And then I'd like to thank the families that support our soldiers. They do a phenomenal job. They suffer the hardship of separation, but they're always there for us and they keep our soldiers going. And then the last group that I'd like to thank are our soldiers and civilians that support Task Force Vanguard that are out here making life safer for the Iraqis with the Iraqi security force counterparts and protecting our international community and our homeland as well.

So thank you very much for letting me talk to you today and share this with Howard.

COL. KECK: Well, thank you gentlemen, and we wish you the best of luck in the future too and that you will have a great holiday coming up and return safely at the end of your tour.

Thank you much for coming, folks.

COL. JAMES: Thank you, Gary.

COL. KECK: Thank you. Happy holidays.

COL. JAMES: Happy holidays to all of you, too.

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